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AUTHOR Peacock, Thomas D.; Day, Donald R.
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ABSTRACT

This digest considers issues, possible solutions, and successful efforts in dealing with Native language loss, maintenance, and restoration in American Indian and Alaska Native communities and schools. The preservation and maintenance of the remaining 210 tribal languages is a major cultural and education concern in Native communities. The problem is urgent, as most Native languages show tell-tale signs of endangerment: declining numbers of all speakers and of fluent speakers; lack of child speakers; and declining language use at social gatherings, at ceremonies, and in the home. Issues include the relationship between language and culture, lack of trained Native language teachers and curriculum materials, student peer pressure not to learn or use the tribal language, religious issues, lack of an acceptable orthography, dialectic differences, urban tribal diversity, and the extent of community support. Indigenous peoples who have had success in their language maintenance efforts share several characteristics: acknowledgment that the language is important enough to save in perpetuity, immersion experiences, literacy programs, community input and assistance, preschool programs, and extensive school programs that integrate language and culture. (Contains 10 references.) (SV)

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Teaching American Indian and Alaska Native Languages in the Schools: What Has Been Learned

Thomas D. Peacock & Donald R. Day

This Digest considers issues and possible solutions in dealing with Native language loss, maintenance, and restoration in American Indian and Alaska Native communities, focusing on successful efforts of schools and communities.

The preservation and maintenance of the remaining 210 tribal languages (Krauss, 1996) is a major cultural and educational issue in American Indian and Alaska Native communities. The considerable efforts by tribes and schools to ensure language survival attests to the extent of that concern. Richard Littlebear captures the urgency of this problem:

> Our native languages are in the penultimate moment of their existence in this world. It is the last and only time that we will have the opportunity to save them. We must continue to promote the successful programs throughout Alaska and Indian Country.
>
> We must quit endlessly lamenting and continuously cataloguing the causes of language death; instead, we must now deal with these issues by learning from successful language preservation efforts.
>
> So if we do nothing, then we can expect our languages to be dead by the end of the next century. Even that time-line might be an optimistic [one], if we do nothing to preserve our languages.
>
> A great void will be left in the universe that will never be filled when all of our languages die (Littlebear, 1996, p. xv).

A Brief Look at the Issues

How do we know when a language is in trouble? James Crawford (1996) offers some tell-tale signs: number of speakers is declining; fluency in the language is greater among older speakers; language use declines in social gatherings, ceremonies, cultural observances, and the home; and parents fail to teach their children the language. The result is that many tribal communities are left with a handful of fluent speakers and that the language is rarely heard except in a few tribal school language classrooms and tribal college classes and at some ceremonies and feasts. Indigenous languages are rarely the language of everyday social discourse, and English is the language of government and commerce in many tribal communities. Linda Cleary and Thomas Peacock's *Collected Wisdom* (1998), which included interviews with Native language teachers, examines the current state of indigenous languages:

- There are two schools of thought about the relationship between American Indian and Alaska Native languages and culture. One would say that the demise of languages will mean the demise of culture. The other says that aspects of culture can exist without language.
- Historical attempts to eliminate American Indian languages are having a profound effect on American Indian education today, with the possible loss of hundreds of tribal languages. Only a concerted effort by schools, homes, and communities will ensure their survival.
- Language maintenance is a paramount concern in American Indian country as attested by the multitude of efforts in many communities.
- American Indian language teachers possess rich cultural backgrounds but may not have been trained as teachers. Teachers must develop most of their own curriculum materials where few or none had existed before.
- Some American Indian students are under intense peer pressure not to learn or use their tribal language.
- Cultural and religious issues sometimes clash with language maintenance efforts.
- The absence of an acceptable orthography (spelling of the language) is an impediment to language maintenance in some communities.
- Dialectic differences and varying levels of proficiency complicate language efforts.
- Urban American Indian students may find access to American Indian language instruction hindered by the number of tribes and languages represented in their schools and the community.
- There are obvious relationships between tribal language use, literacy, and English.
- Teachers can encourage the preservation and maintenance of American Indian languages by modeling and encouraging their use in schools. Communities must seek or retain everyday uses for the language in the community. Students need to understand the purposes for knowing the language.

Successful Models

In communities with only a few remaining fluent speakers, Joshua Fishman (1996) suggested that schools and communities should record the spoken language before it is lost entirely (audio, video, and printed record) to at least approximate a bit of the grammar. However, he cautions that only one language, Hebrew, has been fully revernacularized from the written record. Israel accomplished this feat through a national commitment and by making Hebrew the language of government.

Several models for maintaining Native languages may be replicable for highly committed tribes. Indigenous peoples who have had varying degrees of success in their language maintenance efforts include the Cree (Quebec), Hualapai (Arizona), Hawaiian, Arapaho (Wyoming), Pasqua (Arizona), Inuttitut (Arctic Quebec), and the Mississippi Band of Choctaw. These groups share five characteristics that may be cultivated in other regions:

(1) **Acknowledging that the language is important enough to save in perpetuity.** It is impossible to overestimate the importance of the first of these five characteristics. While many tribes say they support preserving or reacquiring their dying languages, far fewer have taken steps to begin the process. It is time to "walk the talk." Greymorning (1999) explains one of the biggest challenges he faced in developing Arapaho instruction was persuading school administrators, teachers, and even some tribal leaders on the importance of students learning Arapaho. Political, community, and school leaders from all six of the

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aforementioned tribes have strongly acknowledged the need to preserve their languages for the benefit of their tribal members. They live out this commitment in how they organize their lives. Members of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw, for example, use English in tribal government, business enterprises, and public schools, but they use Choctaw in their social, ceremonial, and family lives (Crawford, 1996).

(2) **Immersion experiences.** Immersion experiences allow people to be immersed in the language while away from English (Stiles, 1997). The Navaho, Arapaho, Native Hawaiians, and New Zealand Maori are examples of tribes that use immersion experiences extensively to teach the language (Anonby, 1999; Greymorning, 1999). When learners are in a setting where only the Native language is spoken, they quickly learn how to say "I need to go to the bathroom," "I'm hungry," and a variety of other words and phrases.

(3) **Literacy programs.** Developing the ability to read and write a language helps the language to become permanent. Languages with literary traditions generally survive longer than languages without literary traditions or languages with only oral traditions (Anonby, 1999).

(4) **Community input and assistance.** Success of language maintenance efforts depends on strong community support. If parents do not support their children learning their Native language, success will be difficult. And language initiatives must be interwoven with efforts to preserve Native culture. Many people see no need to learn a language if they do not understand their culture and vice-versa. Nor can successful language efforts prevail if the leadership originates from outside the community. Language preservation must be led by Native institutions, organizations, and tribal activists (Crawford, 1996).

(5) **Language programs in the schools.** One of the most successful initiatives to wipe out American Indian cultures was the requirement that American Indian children attend federal boarding schools. At these schools, American Indian children were not allowed to speak their Native languages. Thus, what hundreds of years of conflict and dislocation could not accomplish, the boarding schools nearly did. Within only a couple of generations, most American Indian and Alaska Natives forgot how to speak their Native languages, and, along with their own languages, they lost significant portions of their cultures that were embedded in these Native languages.

Native languages do not always translate precisely or meaningfully to English. And because all American Indian and Alaska Native religious ceremonies are language based, the inability of American Indians and Alaska Natives to speak their languages caused many to lose understanding of who they were and what their place was in the universe. Many American Indian and Alaska Native people believe that if traditional languages are lost, they will cease to be Indians and become merely descendants of Indians.

Because schools played such a powerful role in the decline of Native languages, it is reasonable to expect they can play a powerful role in restoring languages. Tribal groups that begin Native language instruction at an early age will be more successful than tribes that concentrate on teaching older students (Greymorning, 1997; 1999). Children taking language and culture classes benefit by gaining stronger identities, and knowledge and appreciation of their heritage. In contrast, Native teenagers who are more conflicted about their culture are at greater risk of engaging in gang activity, developing alcohol and drug problems, and dropping out of school (Stiles, 1997).

Successful language programs have trained and motivated Native language teachers in the schools (Greymorning, 1997). Greymorning (1999) credits the Hawaiian Aha Pünana Leo and the Maori for providing both inspiration and effective models for the Arapaho language immersion programs he helped develop in the Wyoming Indian school system. These programs begin in preschool mother/child programs. An Elder woman teaches parents traditional language used in caring for Arapaho children. Children raised this way have a head start when they enter kindergarten Arapaho immersion programs (Greymorning, 1999).

Finally, successful initiatives develop curriculum that combines Native language and cultural instruction, which helps students make more sense of both the language and the culture. Interestingly, many tribes have developed extensive curriculum materials that remain largely underutilized (Greymorning, 1999).

Conclusion

According to Dan Jones, an Ojibwa language professor at Fond du Lac Tribal & Community College in Minnesota, a renaissance is occurring in many parts of the country as Native people strive to relearn their Native languages and cultures. This is evident in the building of sweat lodges, the number of Ojibwa language talking circles being created, and the increasing number of Natives returning to the ceremonies of their ancestors. In a personal interview, Jones noted:

> As an Ojibwe language teacher, I find Native students who are studying their language to be self-motivated, positive, and searching for identity.
>
> I believe that non-natives are becoming more accepting of Indian languages, and that it is the right time to re-acquire our language rights (1999).

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Thomas D. Peacock is an associate professor of education at the University of Minnesota, Duluth, where he teaches and coordinates a doctoral program in educational leadership. He is a member of the Fond du Lac Lake Superior Band of Chippewa.

Dr. Donald R. Day is an assistant professor of education at the University of Minnesota, Duluth. He is enrolled on the Leech Lake Indian Reservation in northern Minnesota.

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